

Drifting Away From the Mainstream: Media attention and the politics of hyperpartisan news websites

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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication
Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

Diese Arbeit wurde durch das Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) gefördert (Förderkennzeichen: 16DII121, 16DII122, 16DII123, 16DII124, 16DII125, 16DII126, 16DII127, 16DII128 – "Deutsches Internet-Institut"). / This work has been funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany (BMBF) (grant no.: 16DII121, 16DII122, 16DII123, 16DII124, 16DII125, 16DII126, 16DII127, 16DII128 – "Deutsches Internet-Institut").

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Yan, P., & Schroeder, R. (2021). Drifting Away From the Mainstream: Media attention and the politics of hyperpartisan news websites. In *Proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2021* (pp. 1-3). Berlin: Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society - The German Internet Institute. <https://doi.org/10.34669/wi.cp/3.10>

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Proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2021

Democracy in Flux

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

Drifting Away From the Mainstream

Media attention and the politics of hyperpartisan news websites

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KEYWORDS

Hyperpartisan media; populism; web-tracking data; computational social science; media attention

DOI: 10.34669/wi.cp/3.10

The proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2021 "Democracy in Flux: Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres" have been funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany (BMBF) (grant no.: 16DII121, 16DII122, 16DII123, 16DII124, 16DII125, 16DII126, 16DII127, 16DII128 – "Deutsches Internet-Institut").

1 INTRODUCTION

Populism has recently enjoyed successes in Europe, in the US, and beyond. Populist leaders and their supporters have accused "mainstream" media of being part of a "corrupt" elite that misrepresents the will of the virtuous "people". Distrust of the media has also led to the rejection of traditional media sources for political information and given prominence to alternative or hyperpartisan sources such as Breitbart. These alternatives have become important media outlets for populist party leaders and their supporters. However, there is limited research about who consumes hyperpartisan media, how the audience of hyperpartisan media is interconnected, and the content of hyperpartisan media. By combining an analysis of a survey with website visits and website content (building on previous work, Stier, Kirkizh, Froio & Schroeder 2020; Yan, Schroeder & Stier 2021) this paper shows the link between populist party support and hyperpartisan media visits.

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our main research questions, led by previous research (including de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, & Stanyer, 2018; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019) are: (RQ1) What are the audiences for hyperpartisan websites? Once we have answered this question, we ask, in (RQ2), what is the network of hyperpartisan websites as measured by their shared audiences? Finally, we examine, in (RQ3), what is the media agenda of hyperpartisan media?

3 CONCLUSIONS

In the full paper, we will present extensive findings from our study. These findings provide a rich and detailed picture of the political support and media trust of visitors to hyperpartisan websites and the network structure and content of hyperpartisan news media during our period of study. Here we briefly summarize our main conclusions and implications: Our study shows that the reach of hyperpartisan media, measured by the percentage of panellists who visited hyperpartisan news domains, is 5.32%. We find a statistically significant link between support for right-wing populist parties and visits to hyper-partisan media while the association between left-wing populist party support and hyperpartisan media visits is much weaker. More importantly perhaps, we find that distrust in public broadcasters and trust in social media both increase the likelihood of visiting hyperpartisan media websites, particularly among right-wing populist party supporters. There is also a larger context for our study, which is that the period under consideration was a highly volatile one in American politics: the Mueller report into President Trump's connections with Russia was a focus of controversy, with the findings of the report and resulting implications eagerly anticipated by different political factions. One obvious feature of the vast bulk of hyperpartisan content in this regard is its negative and critical orientation: attack on elite progressive causes which are perceived as extreme is pervasive, while the much less prominent left-oriented hyperpartisan sites are geared towards motivating political activists. Partisan-fuelled false news and conspiracy theories also feature prominently on hyperpartisan news websites. Further, topic modelling results suggest that while hyperpartisan sites in European countries disproportionately focused on Muslims and immigration, conspiracy theories on hyperpartisan news in the US centred around party politics (such as news content about the "deep state"). Further, the reach of certain hyperpartisan networks and their content attract attention across national and, it seems, linguistic boundaries, even if linguistic boundaries are still the stronger shapers of

reach and attention. All in all, at a time when there is intense contention about the nature of impartiality and objectivity in news and about political partisanship, our analysis adds to this body of research the finding that, especially for right-wing populist supporters, there is what could be called a parallel universe of hyperpartisan websites providing political information that has drifted away from the ‘mainstream’ of news journalism.

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